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SELECTED TRANSLATIONS ON RELIGION IN THE USSR

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FOREWORD

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SELECTED TRANSLATIONS ON
RELIGION IN THE USSR

[This report contains the translations of three articles selected from Nauka i Religiya (Science and Religion), No 7, July 1961. Complete bibliographic information accompanies each article.]

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NOTES FROM A TRAVEL NOTEBOOK

-USSR-

Following is the translation of an article by A. Avtandilyan in Nauka i Religiya (Science and Religion), No 7, July 1961, pages 26-31.

If you were to climb to the foot of the gigantic "Victory" monument, your eyes would behold a great and flourishing city. The blue sky is cloudless. All around you would see the filigreed outlines of construction cranes. The first rays of the morning sun cast a warm glow on the pink tufa of the new houses...

This is Yerevan, the capital of socialist Armenia.

During the years of the Soviet regime, Yerevan, which just four decades ago was nothing more than a remote little provincial town, has been completely transformed, just as the fabled giant of the fairytales.

From a backward agrarian country, Armenia has become an industrialized Soviet republic--a republic with highly developed electrical power, non-ferrous metallurgy, and chemical industries. The cultural and scientific institutions, schools, and higher educational institutions of the country serve the needs of a large scholarly and scientific community occupied in every field of inquiry.

Armenia is famous for its astrophysical observatory at Byurakan. Under the direction of the President of the Academy of Sciences of the Armenian SSR, Viktor Ambartsumyan, the Byurakan Astrophysical Observatory has carried out original scientific studies which have been recognized throughout the world. Academician V. Ambartsumyan has succeeded in discovering stellar associations and the birth of new stars. By proving the natural origin both of old and new stars, he inflicted a powerful blow to religious prejudices--those prejudices which are still fairly widespread among the population of the Armenian SSR.

* * *

It must be pointed out that the pattern of religious beliefs in Armenia is a rather complex one. Its diversity and variety is explained by the national composition of the Republic's population: it is inhabited by Armenians, Azerbaydzhanis, Kurds, and Russians. Armenia is the center of the Armenian-Gregorian Church, headed by the Patriarch of all Armenians, and has numerous "holy places".

During religious holidays, the places visited by pilgrims present a picture of filth, speculation, and drunkenness. Fights among pilgrims are not uncommon.

Taking advantage of the darkness and gullibility of the believers, all manner of chisellers and charlatans scour the land cheating religious people, most of them women.

A man from the Chikdamal settlement of the Spitakskiy Rayon named Sergey proclaimed himself a "saint", quit his job at the kolkhoz, and left his native village. For two whole years this charlatan wandered over those areas of the Soviet Union where Armenians were to be found. In 1958, he returned to his native village. He called one of the rooms of his house a "holy place", and the other the "healing room".

This self-proclaimed "saint" took to writing letters to religiously inclined women living both in Armenia and elsewhere. These letters were supposed to have been "dictated by God". In inviting believers to visit him, he did not fail to mention at the end of his letters that they were expected to bring gifts "for God". He managed to cheat many people with his "predictions". To the sick, he would give plain water mixed with ashes. "Saint" Sergey was recently exposed and brought to trial.

Here is another example. A young mother from Akhuryan, along with several other religious women ascended Mount Kaltagchi (Spitakskiy Rayon), the site of the stone of "Saint Oganess", which is supposed to have miraculous powers. Having purchased two candles, the woman lit them and placed them on the stone of "Saint Oganess". Just at that moment, a light breeze blew out both candles. The woman was griefstricken: "Saint Oganess" refused to help her. She prepared to depart.

Just then, she was approached by a man. "Don't worry. I know the reason for your grief", he said mysteriously. "It was Saint Oganess himself who blew out your candles. If you wish to be rid of the danger which threatens your husband and children, you must mollify Saint Oganess with a great sacrifice".

The dervish pretended to leave. The frightened woman ran after him, begging him to tell her of the sacrifice required by "Saint Oganess". The man stared intensely at the palm of his hand, then looked into the woman's eyes:

"Saint Oganess is very angry that all you brought him

was two candles. He demands a greater sacrifice...you ask what that is. Saint Oganēs himself will reveal it to you in a dream".

The woman took out her last 25 rubles and handed it to him.

Many nights passed, but the saint still failed to appear in a dream. Becoming more and more terrified, the woman became seriously ill. Her children summoned a physician, but their mother refused to take the medicine prescribed by the doctor because she believed that it was "Saint Oganēs" himself who had brought on the illness and that medicines would bring no relief.

So it went on until one fine day there appeared that very same dervish in order to "make known the bidding of Saint Oganēs".

"You will have to slaughter a heifer" he said triumphantly. "You are to make all haste--tomorrow will be too late!"

The sick woman was placed in a cart with a heifer tied to it. So the company went off in the direction of the "holy mountain". Stopping at the foot of the mountain, the weak and gaunt woman was taken from the cart and led up the slope to the summit, where stood the "holy cross". A cold and piercing wind was blowing. The heifer was slaughtered, and the dervish received the hide, legs, head, and one half of the carcass.

"Let God accept this sacrifice" he said placing the gift in a sack.

On the next day, the dervish was detained by the police in the Spitak market as he was going about trying to sell the "sacrifice". The believing woman contracted pneumonia and died within several days, leaving four orphaned children.

Religious prejudices may be encountered not only in the remote villages. I once happened to visit the Public Library imeni Myasnikyan in Yerevan. Great was my surprise when I noticed a little gilt cross hanging from the neck of the librarian Yelena Virabyan. On that day she was working in the science room and issuing books to scientific workers.

"What sort of an education have you had?" I inquired. "I graduated from a secondary school" answered the girl. "Presently I am in my second year of correspondence study at the Pedagogical Institute".

"Well, how is it that you, a member of the Komsomol (Young Communist League), a student, and of all things a worker in a science library, believe in God?"

"Why should I not believe in God when it was he who created men?"

It was then that I clearly realized the level on which the foundations of Darwinism were taught in the school when this girl had recently graduated!

In the cities and villages of the Republic, it is likewise possible to meet members of various sects.

Many sect members live in the villages of the Dilizhanskiy, Kirovakanskiy, Kalininskiy, Tsakhkadzorskiy, and other Rayons in the Republic. The faith of the sect members is characterized by particularly rabid fanaticism: not infrequently, parents forbid their children to put on Pioneer neckerchief, as well as to enter the Komsomol; they openly speak out against lectures, call the radio a "fruit of Satan" and consider the viewing of motion pictures a "mortal sin".

The Baptists in Armenia are headed by the power-loving fanatic Arshavir Mikayelyan, who lives in Arabkir. This "shepherd" does all in his power to villify the discoveries of Soviet scientists and to convince the members of his sect that "the achievements of science mean the death of humanity", and that "human happiness consists in suffering and death". "Scientists", he has said, "strive in vain to understand the Cosmos; for this sin they will end up in Hell". In addition to this, Mikayelyan makes regular visits to the various resort towns of the Soviet Union, seeking out religiously-inclined individuals suffering from some affliction and convincing them that the only possible means of obtaining a cure consists in many years of prayer. In this manner, he attracted the sisters Galina and Mariya K. from Moscow into his sect.

* * *

Within the last several years, much anti-religious work has been done in Armenia. Over 2,000 atheistic lectures were presented in the years 1959 and 1960. Outstanding scientists, experimentalists, historians, and philosophers (Academician V. Ambartsumyan, Professors G. Batikyan, Z. Bashindzhagyan, and many others) frequently present lectures on atheistic subjects. Many people attend the "question-and-answer evenings" and the anti-religious quizzes. Scientific-atheistic colleges have been established at Yerevan, Leninakan, Kirovakan, and several Rayon centers, including Echmiadzin, the center of the Armenian-Gregorian Church. During religious holidays, concerts, sports events, and games are held in the vicinity of the "holy places" such as "Saint Oganess" in the Spitakskiy Rayon. After all, the young people visit the "holy places" from sheer tradition and habit, and for this reason, concerts and sports competitions help to distract boys and girls from participating in religious ceremonies.

A great deal is also being done by the Yerevan Planetarium. Its lecturers have presented talks in many Rayons of the Republic; these lectures and discussions have been attended by 35 thousand persons.

It cannot be overlooked, however, that there are still serious shortcomings and even grave errors in the field of atheistic re-education of believers and anti-religious propaganda.

Thus, certain members of the intelligentsia share the highly erroneous belief in the "exceptional character" of the Armenian-Gregorian Church, in its "progressive role" throughout the history of Armenia. These people fail to notice or deliberately overlook the incontrovertible historical fact that the Armenian Church, just as any other church, from its very beginning worked to strengthen the power of the feudal lords, justifying the repression of the peasants and itself exploiting the laboring masses.

This conciliatory attitude toward church and religion is made apparent in the fact that some scientists continue to publish articles in the religious magazine Echmiadzin. Within the last few years, 25 such articles by scholars and scientists on various subjects have appeared on the pages of this periodical.

Likewise of great harm to anti-religious propaganda is the erroneous and completely unfounded self-confidence evinced by many persons in this area. One frequently meets people who reason somewhat along the following lines: "Since we have already undermined the social roots of religion, there is actually no need to carry on anti-religious propaganda; let the believers believe--after all, there is no great harm in faith".

For example, the Director of the secondary school in the village of Zhdanovo, Agvan Yenokyan, made the following statement at a faculty meeting: "There are no believers in our village, consequently, there is no need to talk about religion". One of the women teachers echoed this theme when she said that "our pupils see priests only in motion pictures; is it really then necessary to talk about anti-religious propaganda?". And all of this was said in a village which stands not very far away from a "holy place" (kamakatar) that still continues to draw numerous believers!

The Republic has not yet launched a full-blown program of scientific-atheistic propaganda; there is no individual work among believers. In the Houses of Culture at the Rayon level, there are still no atheistic departments which could unite local propagandists in leading a frontal attack against religious prejudices. There are no atheistic posters. Anti-religious propaganda is poorly conducted in the periodical

press; scientific-atheistic literature is not being published. There are no popular brochures and books connected with actual and timely themes. The booklets issued so far by the local publishing house do not contain anything about the Armenian-Gregorian Church and its reactionary role; no local examples are presented. All of this is explained by the fact that the authors of such booklets are unaware of what is happening around them.

The rich experience accumulated by atheistic propagandists in the other constituent republics of our country must serve as a fine example for the atheists of Armenia.

The time has come to put an end to the policy of dispensing atheistic propaganda only within clubs and libraries. It is a well-known fact that believers as a rule do not attend such lectures and evenings because of their religious convictions. It is necessary to bring the living and convincing atheistic word to the level of the workshop and production line, to spread it in the harvest camps and animal farms where believers do their work; atheism must be brought into the apartments where workers live.

It is extremely important to carry on anti-religious work with parents of school children by presenting lectures on atheistic themes to parent groups.

Various religious ceremonies, such as weddings, are performed in a colorful and festive manner in the Armenian churches. This, of course, attracts people. It is necessary to take cognizance of this fact and to counteract church ceremonies with our own Soviet civil rites which are imbued with such deep meaning and optimistic festivity.

But what does one now see in the civil registry offices of Armenia? I visited the zags (registry office) in the Spandaryanskiy Rayon of Yerevan. What I found was an empty, uncomfortable hall with bare and cold walls. The windows were without curtains. Flowers were nowhere in sight. There was not even the simplest tablecloth on the desk. And on this bare, "office-type" desk there stood several bottles of champagne and brandy.

Library workers could also do a great deal. There are quite a number of readers who still have believing relatives. Such readers must help their religious relatives to find the correct answers to troublesome questions; they must encourage them to read scientific-atheistic brochures and books.

Popular atheistic colleges and anti-religious lecture halls must be established in the first place in those rayons and settle areas where one finds numerous repatriated settlers recently returned from abroad.

In atheistic work with the populace, it is necessary to make full use of the achievements of the Byurakan Observatory, this true center of scientific atheism. It would be a fine

thing if the cities of Leninakan, Krovakan, and Sevan would organize mobile planetariums in the very near future.

But what is most important is to mount a campaign of scientific-atheistic propaganda on a truly large scale, rallying the intelligentsia of the Republic to this great and noble task. We need to help new propagandists of atheism to master the knowledge and techniques which they will need in their work.

THEY ARE POSSESSED BY WORRY

-USSR-

Following is the translation of an article by Yu. Kop'yev in Nauka i Religiya (Science and Religion), No 7, July 1961, page 34.

In looking over the Catholic Cathedral in the West German town of Freiburg, I noticed the bundles of leaflets which seemed to be lying all about. To tell the truth, I was quite surprised by the drawing on the cover of the leaflets: it was neither a crucifix nor a picture of the Virgin Mary, but rather one depicting an ordinary mortal hunched in despair over a restaurant table. What relationship did such a "mundane" drawing bear to the tasks of the church? My interest piqued, I picked up a leaflet.

"We are beset by worries", I read, "worries large and small, private and vocational. But we frequently forget our most important worry--that of extending the Kingdom of God on this earth!"

This statement was, so to speak, made in the name of the believers, whom the Vatican insistently tries to rally to the task of spreading Catholicism. Well, this was nothing new: it is a well-known fact that the Catholic Church always devoted a great deal of attention to proselytizing.

"Here are some shocking facts" I read on, "after almost two thousand years of missionary work, only 17% of the earth's people are Catholics".

Yes, this fact is indeed disappointing, especially if one takes into account that the figure given is obviously exaggerated: it is no secret that the Vatican numbers among its flock all those whose names appear in the congregation rolls and the fact that in the capitalist countries, persons indifferent to the church and even complete unbelievers are forced to join a congregation under Church and state pressure.

On the other hand, as pointed out in the leaflet, "communism" has taken over 35% of the world's population. And how many years did it take "communism" to achieve this victory? The leaflet does not mention this, since any com-

parison would certainly not turn out in favor of the Catholic Church. Two thousand years on the one hand and 43 years on the other--quite a great difference.

"The Asians and Africans", continue the authors of the leaflet, "are uniting themselves in huge blocks of humanity. There may come a day when they will crush little, tired, Europe..."

So this is what the propagandists in the soutanes are worried about! The rapid growth of the socialist system, and the emergence of the nationalistic liberation movement in Asia and Africa, it turns out, present a threat of destruction to little, unfortunate Europe (meaning, of course, the capitalist countries of Europe exclusively). They know full well that neither Europe nor the Catholic faith is being threatened by anyone. But in their struggle against progress and socialism, all weapons are acceptable, including lies--Ignatius Loyola himself would have agreed with such a statement.

Further down, I found some astonishing figures: it turns out that in a year's time, the Germans spend 15.7 million marks on tobacco and liquor; this amounts to 10% of the gross national income of the German Federated Republic. The annual contributions to missionary work, on the other hand, amount to just 8.6 million marks. "What a terrifying disparity!" exclaim the lackeys of "Saint Peter".

The way to salvation is indicated in the same leaflet. In addition to saying their daily prayers, believers must deny themselves at least one package of cigarettes per month, or two mugs of beer or one visit to the motion picture theater; the money thus saved must be contributed to "the Pope's cause of propagating the faith". The leaflet goes on to say that if this amount really cannot be spared, one pfennig a day will be enough. This amount will go not only to save the souls of men and to aid God's cause, but also for your subscription to the magazine World Missions or Catholic Missions. But pay you must! Heed the call for assistance! Time will not wait!

Yes, sorry indeed is the state of affairs in the Catholic Church if its fathers have to use such cheap methods and such irritating extortion. It is obvious that thousands of believers are leaving their faith and that even among the devout Catholics there are not so many who are willing to contribute their pennies to the propagation of Catholicism among other peoples. Millions of believers are gradually beginning to understand who is behind the authors of such leaflets.

WHERE THE CHURCH ONCE RULED

-USSR-

Following is the translation of an article by I. Mikulovich, Secretary of the Grodno Oblast Committee of the Communist Party, in Nauka i Religiya (Science and Religion), No 7, July 1961, pages 82-84.

For a long time, the Grodnenskaya Oblast was a part of feudal Poland. Attempting to extend their influence even further to the east, the Polish government with the aid of the Vatican undertook to forcibly Catholicize Western Belorussia. The Catholicized Belorussian was told that he was now a Pole and should be hostile to Russia. There was nothing new in this policy. For centuries on end, the Vatican had been sending thousands of missionary priests to this area.

The Orthodox Church, in turn, did not lag far behind. In order to hinder the spread of Catholicism, it dispatched its more experienced priests into Belorussia.

To counter the weight of the 150 Catholic churches and 100 Jewish synagogues and Protestant houses of prayer, the Orthodox priests established over 500 of their own churches. Thus, Grodnenskaya Oblast attracted the top-echelon ideologists and servants of the cult from all faiths; this situation could not help but leave a definite impression.

In addition to this, sectarianism was being widely propagated in the Oblast in the 1920s and 30s. Baptist, Pentacostalist, and Adventist congregations sprang up almost in every village.

Following the Great War of the Motherland (World War II), anti-religious propaganda in the Oblast was for a long time left to languish. There were not enough experienced atheistic propagandists. For this reason, we decided to initiate our anti-religious effort first and foremost with the training of propagandists. Systematic atheistic seminars were started in the Oblast, city, and rayon Party committees.

In order to prepare more highly-qualified propagandists in evening sessions at the University of Marxism-Leninism,

there was organized a department of scientific atheism whose graduates were dispatched by us primarily to train atheistic lecturers on the rayon level. In addition to this, within the framework of the political education system, there were created 89 anti-religious circles which trained about one and a half thousand persons. These circles worked on the basis of a specially developed program which made it possible to prepare atheistic propagandists who knew Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and sectarianism. After completing a definite theme in their studies, the students were called upon to present lectures or hold discussions with believers.

The Oblast Committee of the Party furnished the atheistic lecturers with various helpful materials, among which was a collection of documents entitled On the Reactionary Role of the Church in the Grodnenskaya Oblast (culled from the Grodno archives of the 17th-20th Centuries).

Whereas previously the propagandists would frequently evade questions having to do with church activities in the Grodnenskaya Oblast, they now make wide use of local examples and facts drawn from both history and modern life in their lectures and discussions; they tell how the Inquisition burned to death the atheist Lyshchanskiy in 1688 and tell of the acts of treason perpetrated by churchmen during the war years, etc.

Houses and lecture halls for atheistic propaganda have been established in many rayons; these agencies are doing a great deal to persuade the population and provide good experience in the mastery of propagandistic techniques.

As a result of systematic training, the ideological and scientific level of lecturers on atheism has been considerably improved. The content of atheistic propaganda is tied in closely with the actual business of Communist construction. Recently, we have begun to make wide use of question-and-answer sessions, film lectures, thematic evenings, and other forms of atheistic work.

The film lecture hall at Grodno is especially popular. Its presentations draw 300 and more persons. Colorful posters are displayed all over the city prior to each presentation, and invitational tickets are distributed in advance to the various enterprises and agencies in the city. Similar film lecture halls are presently functioning in the Novogrudskiy, Korelichskiy, and Volkovysskiy Rayons. The practice of atheistic propaganda shows that film lecture halls are one of the most effective means of spreading atheism.

Special attention is being devoted to the propagation of atheism in areas where the churches are most active, for example, in Zhirovitsy, which is the site of a religious

seminary.

Just before Easter, a thematic evening was held in the village of Zabolot' of the Radunskiy Rayon, which featured as guest speaker a former student at the Papal Eastern Religious Academy in the Vatican, Comrade Beschastnyy. Convinced of the hypocrisy and underhandedness of the Catholic hierarchy together with its head the Roman Pope, he renounced religion and became an active propagandist of materialist views. Having at his disposal an enormous body of factual material supported by personal observations, he showed convincingly that the Vatican is wholly and completely a weapon in the service of international imperialism. The lecturer was bombarded with questions. One of the believing Catholics began to argue with him:

"If religion is harmful to man, why is it that most people, especially the older and more experienced ones, continue to believe in God?"

"Tell me, how many years has your cathedral been in existence?" Comrade Beschastnyy replied.

"Two hundred".

"How many years has your school been standing?"

"Not very many; it was built only after the Soviets came to power".

"Well, there you have it. If the school had been standing the same number of years as your cathedral, there would probably be no believers in your village today", concluded the lecturer to the applause of the audience.

Thematic evenings on natural science are also being systematically held in Grodno, other rayon centers, and villages. More attention is being devoted to individual work with believers. Interesting work experience has been accumulated in the Mostovskiy Rayon, where the local atheistic agency is being run by the experienced lecturer, Comrade Simenov.

A great role in atheistic propaganda is now being played by cultural and educational agencies. The Oblast Committee of the Party has on more than one occasion held special meetings of directors of Houses of Culture in order to assist them in outlining measures on the improvement of atheistic propaganda. The cultural education agencies have been assisted in obtaining equipment, supplies, and musical instruments, as well as in building up an atheistic repertoire for amateur acting groups and in the creation of atheistic nooks.

The results of purposeful scientific-atheistic propaganda now being conducted in the Oblast are presently bearing fruit. Believers have begun to renounce religion. In the Milevichskiy, Ozerkovskiy, Kurilovichskiy, Mal'kovichskiy,

and certain other rayons, attendance in churches, cathedrals, and sectarian prayer houses has been considerably curtailed.

The greatest difficulties are encountered in the struggle in Catholicism. But here too we have met with a certain amount of success. Thus, in the village of Kremyanitsy of the Zel'venskiy Rayon, the Party organization has been ably and systematically carrying out a program of atheistic propaganda, as a result of which a large group of collective farmers have broken with religion.

This was achieved because the Party organization created a nucleus of active atheists from among the local intelligentsia. This group included members of the local circle on scientific atheism and the village branch of the Society for the Propagation of Political and Scientific Knowledge. A plan was first worked out and then gradually and patiently put into effect. All of the work brigades heard lectures on scientific subjects.

In time, the believers acquired a taste for lectures and were prepared for the understanding of more complex problems. After this, the lecture cycles began to include atheistic materials as well. This work was carried out systematically; when it was discovered that some listener began to harbor doubts on the correctness of religious dogmas, the members of the lecture team would begin to work with this individual privately. This method brought significant results. Despite the efforts of the local priest and "dvadtsatka" (nucleus of twenty active church members), the influx of worshippers into the local church fell off considerably. The collective farmers began to work on religious holidays. A large portion of the youth not only broke with the church, but also joined the Komsomol (Young Communist League).

In a collective declaration, the villagers wrote: "We understand full well that religion hinders the construction of Communism. For this reason we hereby declare our severance away from religion and call upon all to follow our example".

It was just several years ago that there were many applicants desiring to enroll in the Zhirovichi seminary; within the last two years, this institution has enrolled just a few new students. Local coolness toward religion is likewise evidenced by the cessation of pilgrimages to the "holy places".

All of this shows that ably conducted and aggressive scientific-atheistic propaganda has allowed us to achieve certain successes in the struggle with religious survivals. It would be wrong to think, however, that all is now well in our Oblast: we attack and the churchmen retreat. Everyone knows that religious survivals are extremely tenacious and

that the work of overcoming them is extremely complex and difficult. In order to reinforce their position, the churchmen have recently begun to engage in strategic manoeuvres delivering sermons in which they describe Communism as one of the religions. To counteract the intensified program of atheistic propaganda, the servants of the cult are exceeding the bounds of religious activity and violating Soviet laws. There have been cases when they have taught children the Catechism, organized unlawful processions, and attracted minors to serve as altar boys in cathedrals and churches. In a number of rayons in the Oblast, there still exist illegal and unregistered groups of Pentacostalists, Jehovah's Witnesses, etc.

Over a year ago, the Plenum of the Oblast Committee of the Party discussed measures on the realization of the Resolution of the Central Committee of the CPSU "On the Tasks of Party Propaganda under Modern Conditions". The Oblast Committee Plenum has played an important role in intensifying ideological efforts in the Oblast, including scientific-atheistic propaganda.

Over the past year, lectures on scientific-atheistic and scientific subjects have been presented at rayon, village, and collective farm clubs, in factories, and in the secondary schools. A cycle of lectures on atheism is being presented to students in all departments at the various pedagogical and agricultural institutes.

About to be published are brochures on the atheistic education of elementary school children, a collection of articles entitled "Why We Broke with Religion", etc. We are emphasizing that the struggle against religious prejudices should be conducted in such a way as not to antagonize believers, but rather to have them unite with the atheists in the active struggle for Communism.

The Grodnenskaya Oblast, city and rayon Party Committees are resolute in their determination to extend and intensify scientific-atheistic propaganda efforts among the people in order to help Soviet citizens enmeshed in religious prejudice to overcome it and to become conscientious builders of a Communist society.